

Performance-Based Research Fund Sector Reference Group: Consultation paper #8 - Review of the assessment framework (Part 1: Potential changes to the framework)

Sector feedback and in-principle decisions

Purpose

The Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) Sector Reference Group (SRG) sought feedback from the sector and other stakeholders on the proposed changes to the assessment process for the 2018 Quality Evaluation at an overarching level. The SRG also indicated that a second paper on the assessment framework would focus on more detailed aspects of the process.

This document provides:

- a summary of the responses received;
- a summary of any concerns raised relating to the options and recommendations; and
- the Tertiary Education Commission's (TEC's) in-principle decisions on each aspect of the proposal.

Introduction

The *Review of the assessment framework (Part 1: Potential changes to the framework)* consultation paper provided the sector and other key stakeholders with background information on the assessment process used in the Quality Evaluation process, as well as the issues arising from the 2012 Quality Evaluation, information on the decisions made by Cabinet in relation to changes to the Quality Evaluation assessment process, proposed some changes for the 2018 Quality Evaluation, and invited feedback on the issues raised and any SRG proposals and any other matters not raised in the paper.

Feedback on this consultation paper was invited through the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) from 13 July to 21 August 2015. Consultation has now closed.

A total of 15 responses were received. These were from:

- Auckland University of Technology
- Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology
- Eastern Institute of Technology
- Lincoln University
- Massey University
- Otago Polytechnic
- Tertiary Education Union Te Hautū Kahurangi o Aotearoa
- University of Auckland
- University of Canterbury
- University of Otago
- University of Otago - Division of Health Sciences
- University of Waikato
- Victoria University of Wellington
- Two individuals

The Ministry of Education and Callaghan Innovation also provided feedback. Feedback has been anonymised.

Process information

The SRG have considered the feedback from the sector and other stakeholders relating to each of the matters identified in the consultation paper and have indicated their preferred option, which has been recommended to the TEC.

The TEC approved these recommendations in-principle on the understanding that the consultation process is on-going and other decisions or external factors may require these recommendations to be reconsidered as part of the development of the final guidelines.

Next steps

The SRG will use the in-principle decisions as the basis of the draft guidelines for the 2018 Quality Evaluation. These guidelines will be provided to the sector and other stakeholders for consultation before they are finalised in June 2016. The purpose of the consultation on the draft guidelines is to ensure that the guidance is clear and unambiguous, not to re-consult on matters already consulted upon and agreed.

Organisation of summary

Each of the 15 responses has been analysed. Feedback is summarised according to the following sections:

- A. Evidence Portfolio (EP) submission
- B. Assignment of EPs
- C. Individual assessment
- D. Scoring system including scoring new and emerging researchers
- E. Component scoring and tie-point descriptors
- F. Panel assessment
- G. Quality Categories
- H. Any other matters

A. EP submission

Information on subject areas more likely to cross subject-area boundaries

The SRG noted that the 2012 Quality Evaluation Guidelines included specific information on subject areas which were more likely to cross subject-area boundaries than others in order to assist tertiary education organisations (TEOs) and staff members identify where a cross-referral may be required.

The SRG proposed to exclude information on cross subject-area boundaries from the 2018 Quality Evaluation Guidelines due to:

- the Cabinet decision to remove the ability of TEOs to request cross-referrals (with the exception of the Māori Knowledge and Development (MKD) and Pacific Research panels); and
- the prevalence of interdisciplinary research in the modern research environment.

The SRG sought feedback on this proposal.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Do you support the proposal to exclude information on cross subject-area boundaries from the 2018 Quality Evaluation Guidelines?	Response %	Response #
Yes	80.0%	12
No	20.0%	3

This proposal received strong support with the main concern raised related to the Cabinet decision to remove the ability for TEOs to request a cross-referral and the potential to disadvantage an individual researcher. Concerns were also raised regarding the potential workload for Chairs in determining which EPs would require a cross-referral.

It is important to recognise that TEOs and their staff members are responsible for:

- a. selecting the panel where the subject area best matches the research outputs within the EP, particularly the four Nominated Research Outputs (NROs); and
- b. ensuring that the 'primary field of research' description accurately reflects both the research field of the EP's NROs and the balance of the staff member's research activity during the assessment period as this information is used by the Chair to guide the allocation of an EP for assessment, and potentially cross-referral.

It is also important to recognise that panels operate on the principle that they will seek additional advice where this advice cannot be sourced within the panel. The SRG agrees with this principle and also making this explicit within the guidelines. The SRG can also clarify that the panel members have the ability to raise concerns with their Chair if they believe that a cross-referral may be required. Specific advice on this will be provided in the 2018 Guidelines and discussed in the panel training process.

In-principle decision

Exclude information on cross subject-area boundaries from the 2018 Quality Evaluation Guidelines.

Other areas relating to EP assignment which could be improved for the 2018 Quality Evaluation: subject areas and guidelines for Māori and Pacific Research

The SRG also sought feedback in regard to other areas relating to EP assignment which could be improved for the 2018 Quality Evaluation.

A review of the responses for each question has been undertaken and summarised below.

Are the subject areas covered by each panel appropriate? If not, what changes need to be considered?	Response %	Response #
Yes	78.6%	11
No	21.4%	3

Responses indicate that the subject areas covered by each panel are considered to be appropriate, with many responses indicating that consistency between rounds was extremely important.

Some specific subject areas were identified for the SRG’s consideration. The SRG and the TEC agree with stakeholders regarding consistency between Quality Evaluation rounds but recommends that the relevant panels make the following clarifications in their panel-specific guidelines:

- Clarification of the differences between ‘design’ in Creative and Performing Arts and ‘design’ in Engineering, Technology, and Architecture.
- Clarification of the difference between communication studies as assessed within the Business and Economics panel, and assessed within the Social Sciences and Other Cultural/Social Sciences panel (under the subject area of “Communications, Journalism and Media Studies”).

In-principle decisions

Maintain the current subject areas assessed by peer review panels.

The relevant peer review panels will clarify the areas of ‘design’ and ‘communication studies’ as part of the development of the panel-specific guidelines.

The SRG sought feedback on whether the *Guidelines for Special Input Requirements: Māori Research* as set out in the 2012 Quality Evaluation Guidelines should be reviewed.

The SRG has identified that the Cabinet decision regarding the removal of Special Advisors will need to be reflected in these guidelines, however feedback was sought on any other issues would need to be addressed.

Should the SRG review the Guidelines for Special Input Requirements: Māori Research? If so, what are the key issues?	Response %	Response #
Yes	61.5%	8
No	38.5%	5

Responses indicate that some minor review should be considered and that any changes should align with the panel-specific guidelines developed by the Māori Knowledge and Development peer review panel.

New fields in the EP structure that identify if an EP contains Māori research will mean that these guidelines should also provide advice on the completion of these fields. The SRG also believes that renaming this advice may also be appropriate.

In-principle decision

Revise the *Guidelines for Special Input Requirements: Māori Research* to ensure that they are fit for purpose and reflect the agreed decisions regarding cross-referrals, with additional review and finalisation to be undertaken by the Māori Knowledge and Development peer review panel.

The SRG also sought feedback on whether *Guidelines for Special Input Requirements: Pacific Research* should be developed by the SRG and the Pacific Research peer review panel.

Should the SRG and the Pacific Research peer review panel develop Guidelines for Special Input Requirements: Pacific Research?	Response %	Response #
Yes	73.3%	11
No	26.7%	4

Responses indicate that this should occur with most responses indicating that this would be useful to assist with decisions on whether the research submitted within EPs was considered Pacific research. Specific suggestions for what the guidance should include were also provided.

New fields in the EP structure that identify if an EP contains Pacific research will mean that these guidelines should also provide advice on the completion of these fields. As noted above, the SRG believes renaming this advice may also be appropriate.

In-principle decision

Guidelines for Special Input Requirements: Pacific Research to be developed by the Pacific Research peer review panel with support from the SRG as required.

B. Assignment of EPs

The SRG noted Cabinet has agreed that cross-referrals are limited to peer review panel Chairs. The main issue related to the assignment of EPs in the 2012 Quality Evaluation (as identified by panels) was the lack of direction given to cross-referral panels from the primary panel Chair when a cross-referral was sought.

As Chairs will be solely responsible for requesting cross-referrals in the 2018 Quality Evaluation, the SRG proposed that Chairs provide specific advice on what part or parts of an EP need to be included in the cross-referral assessment. This commentary would assist the cross-referral Chair to determine if the cross-referral is appropriate and assign it to an appropriate assessor.

The SRG sought feedback on this proposal.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Do you agree that Chairs provide specific advice on what part or parts of an EP need to be included in the cross-referral assessment?	Response %	Response #
Yes	100.0%	14
No	0.0%	0

There was unanimous support for this proposal. No significant issues were raised in regard to this proposal. A question was raised as to whether the allocation of EPs is the best point in the process for Chairs to identify EPs for cross-referral (i.e. some Chairs may want to confer with panel members before deciding on which EPs to cross-refer).

This is currently part of the process and as noted above, panel members also have the ability to raise concerns with their Chair if they believe that a cross-referral may be required. Specific advice on this will be provided in the 2018 Guidelines and discussed in the panel training process.

In-principle decision

Peer review panel Chairs will provide specific advice on which part or parts of an EP need to be considered in the cross-referral assessment.

C. Individual assessment

Cross-referral assessment process

The SRG noted that the most significant issue identified by panels in the individual assessment stage of the 2012 Quality Evaluation was in regard to the poor quality of additional input provided by cross-referral assessments.

The SRG proposed some changes to the cross-referral assessment process and sought feedback on two options.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

	Response %	Response #
Option 1: Require cross-referral assessors to provide a commentary which would include confirmation of the aspects of the EP were assessed and provide a rationale for the component scores provided; and require the panel pair to include the cross-referral assessor in the discussion to determine the Preliminary component scores in cases where the scores are significantly different (i.e. more than two points difference).	53.3%	8
Option 2: Require cross-referral assessors to provide a commentary which would include confirmation of the aspects of the EP were assessed and provide a rationale for the component scores provided; and require the panel pair to include the cross-referral assessor in the discussion to determine the Preliminary component scores in all cases.	46.7%	7

Responses were split across the two options, with concerns regarding panellist workload being considered a significant factor in support for option 1. Concerns regarding the suggested threshold were raised, specifically as it would only apply in cases where three points difference or more across the total scale of only seven points. It was suggested that this threshold is decreased to “two points or more”.

Support for option 2 indicated that cross-referral assessors should be included in all discussions as the quality or impact may not be understood by the panel pair and even one point can alter the assessment of the portfolio, particularly if it was a tie-point.

The SRG can also clarify that cross-referral scoring may only relate to specific items within a component, while the score given by a panel pair relates to all items within that component.

In-principle decision

Implement a modified Option 2.

- All cross-referral assessors must provide a commentary along with the scores for

their assessment. This commentary must include confirmation of the part(s) of the EP that were assessed and provide a rationale for the component score(s) provided.

- The panel pair is to include the cross-referral assessor in the discussion to determine the Preliminary component scores in all cases where a difference in scoring could impact on the result.
- A flag will be included in the PBRF IT system to enable the monitoring of the discussions process with cross-referral assessors.

Assessment of special circumstances

The SRG also identified issues regarding the assessment of special circumstances at this stage of the assessment process.

Information from previous Quality Evaluations shows that special circumstances have limited impact on Preparatory scores however; the requirement for each assessor to provide two scores for each component increases the complexity of the assessment.

The SRG proposed that special circumstances should only be assessed at the Holistic scoring stage when the entire panel is well calibrated and able to participate in the assessment.

The SRG sought feedback on this proposal.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Do you support special circumstances being assessed at the Holistic scoring stage only?	Response %	Response #
Yes	93.3%	14
No	6.7%	1

Responses indicate that there is a strong level of support for this change with strong support for the SRG's rationale for change.

In-principle decision

Extra-ordinary circumstances will only be assessed at the Holistic assessment stage for the 2018 Quality Evaluation.

Minimum percentage of NROs to be examined

The SRG proposed that the minimum percentage of NROs expected to be examined by panel members during the individual assessment stage should be increased from 25% to 50%, noting the changes to the size of EPs and the increased accessibility of NROs in electronic form as the rationale.

The SRG sought feedback on this proposal.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Do you support increasing the minimum percentage of NROs expected to be examined by panel members during the individual assessment stage from 25% to 50%?	Response %	Response #
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Yes	80.0%	12
No	20.0%	3

Responses indicate that this proposal is strongly supported. Concerns were raised relating to the workload for panels if the percentage was increased and the potential that this increase could negate the changes aimed at improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the EP assessment process.

Information from the 2012 Quality Evaluation shows that all peer review panels examined more than 50% of the NROs submitted within EPs (see table below). Feedback from panels also indicated a strong preference for all assessment material to be submitted electronically in order to assist the assessment process. This indicates that the increase is appropriate.

Peer review panel	Percentage of NROs examined by panel members
Biological Sciences	97.34%
Business and Economics	70.55%
Creative and Performing Arts	67.19%
Education	66.79%
Engineering Technology and Architecture	93.04%
Health	73.80%
Humanities and Law	76.89%
Māori Knowledge and Development	90.64%
Mathematical and Information Sciences and Technology	84.41%
Medicine and Public Health	59.94%
Physical Sciences	76.65%
Social Sciences and Other Cultural/Social Sciences	73.60%
All panels	80.42%

In-principle decisions

Each peer review panel is expected to examine at least 50% of the NROs listed in the EPs that it is responsible for assessing.

Panels may examine more than 50% of NROs if they consider it appropriate and necessary. Individual panels' decisions on the percentage of NROs to be examined will be included in the panel-specific guidelines.

D. Scoring system including scoring new and emerging researchers

The SRG noted that the 2012 Quality Evaluation guidelines advised that

“In order for a new and emerging researcher to have the potential to secure the new Quality Category “C(NE)”, evidence will need to be provided that includes at least the following:

- a) *The successful completion of a Doctoral degree or equivalent during the assessment period for the Quality Evaluation AND ‘Other’ research outputs of an adequate quality and quantity, bearing in mind the time period during which the staff member has been PBRF-eligible (a minimum of two quality-assured research outputs would normally be expected)*

OR

- b) *Research outputs equivalent to a) above.*¹

The guidelines also provided a definition of Doctoral degree or equivalent:

*“In most disciplines, a Doctoral degree is regarded as the appropriate entry-level degree for an academic appointment involving research; in some other disciplines, however, either a Masters degree (in, for example, Creative and Performing Arts) or a professional qualification (such as in Law or Education) may be the customary qualification for a research career. Staff members without a Doctoral degree would normally need to provide evidence of more than the minimum number of research outputs (i.e. two).”*²

The SRG sought feedback on whether this guidance was sufficiently clear or whether additional guidance is required, and if additional guidance was required what the key issues were.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Are the evidence requirements for the “C(NE)” Quality Category sufficiently clear or is additional guidance is required?	Response %	Response #
Yes, the requirements are clear	40.0%	6
No, the requirements are not clear and additional guidance is required.	60.0%	9

Responses indicate that the requirements are not clear.

The SRG will review the questions and comments noted above and revise the evidence requirements for the “C(NE)” Quality Category. These will be included in the second consultation paper.

Some concern was raised in the feedback regarding the expectations for the Research Contribution (RC) component for new and emerging researchers, and whether RC evidence would be considered and included in scoring in EP where it is presented.

The SRG confirmed in the consultation paper that the provision will remain in place which allows for new and emerging researchers awarded a score of ‘2’ for their RO component and a ‘1’ or ‘0’ in their RC component (i.e. limited or no Research Contribution component items), to have their weighted score automatically rounded up from 140 or 170 to 200 in order to receive a “C(NE)” Quality Category.

The SRG also reiterates that new and emerging researchers that meet the same standards as all other staff members can receive an “A” or “B” Quality Category.

E. Component scoring and tie-point descriptors

The SRG noted that there had been no substantive change to the Research Output (RO) component as part of the review of the PBRF but sector feedback was sought on whether

¹ TEC, PBRF Quality Evaluation Guidelines 2012, May 2013, p.133

² ibid

any changes are required to either the RO component descriptor or the tie-point descriptors, and if so, what change is required and why.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Are any changes required to either the Research Output component descriptor or the tie-point descriptors?	Response %	Response #
Yes	40.0%	6
No	60.0%	9

Responses generally indicate that no change is required to the RO component descriptor or the tie-point descriptors, with commentary indicating that these are well understood by the sector and panels.

Some responses indicated that some change should be incorporated, however most changes indicated are better reflected in the panel-specific guidelines than the main descriptors.

In-principle decisions

Maintain the current Research Output component descriptors and tie-point descriptors.

Peer review panels will consider stakeholder responses as part of the development of the panel-specific guidelines.

The SRG also identified that a new Research Contribution (RC) component descriptor and tie-point descriptors would need to be developed, which would draw upon the detailed criteria for assessing the excellence of applied research developed the 2012 Quality Evaluation's Professional and Applied Expert Advisory Group.

The SRG will review the responses and develop a draft RC component descriptor and tie-point descriptors. These will be included in the second consultation paper.

F. Panel assessment

Holistic assessment

The SRG noted that following the 2012 Quality Evaluation, panels recommended that more detailed and explicit advice be provided for changing a Quality Category as a result of the holistic assessment, and questions were raised regarding the timing of this assessment in the assessment process. Providing specific holistic tie-point descriptors was also suggested.

The SRG proposed providing additional guidance on the holistic assessment stage of the assessment process, including the specific consideration of special circumstances as identified previously, and sought feedback on this proposal.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Do you support the proposal to develop additional guidance on the holistic assessment stage of the assessment process, including the specific consideration of special circumstances as identified previously?	Response %	Response #
Yes	100.0%	14
No	0.0%	0

There was unanimous support for this proposal.

In-principle decision

Develop additional guidance on the holistic assessment stage of the assessment process, including the specific consideration of special circumstances.

G. Quality Categories

The SRG did not identify any significant issues relating to the Quality Category descriptions, but noted that concerns had been raised regarding the term “world-class” and the distinction the definitions make between international and national contribution and recognition.

The SRG sought feedback on whether this was an area that could be improved for the 2018 Quality Evaluation.

A review of the responses has been undertaken and summarised below.

Do you believe that the Quality Category descriptions, specifically the term “world-class” and the distinction the definitions make between international and national contribution and recognition, could be improved for the 2018 Quality Evaluation?	Response %	Response #
Yes	71.4%	10
No	28.6%	4

Responses indicate that there is a level of support for reviewing the terminology used, while maintaining the overall Quality Category descriptions.

A number of responses commented on the areas where they felt there were issues.

The SRG will review the comments noted above and undertake further revision as required. Any proposals for change in the second consultation paper on the assessment framework.

H. Any other matters

The SRG sought feedback on any areas or issues relating to the review of the assessment framework that require attention but were not already included in the consultation paper, or would be addressed in the second consultation paper on this topic.

It was noted that more information on how the impact of applied research will be described and valued in the 2018 Quality Evaluation. The SRG has identified that the second consultation paper on this topic will include information on applied research.

It was also suggested that an assessment process diagram (running through from submission of the EP to a selected assessment panel all the way to the allocation of the final Quality Category) in the next consultation paper and guidelines could be very useful. The SRG agrees with this suggestion and a diagram will be included in other information on the assessment process provided by the SRG and the TEC.